

# Book Reviews

## **Asparagus Dreams**

**Jessica Peers. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers; 2003. 218p. US \$17.95**

In recent years a large number of personal accounts of disease, disability and trauma have been published in many languages and many formats - films, paintings, poetry, quilting, dance and music - as well as the more traditional written account. Narrative accounts of psychiatric disorders include early works such as John Perceval's "Perceval's narrative: a patient's account of his psychosis, 1830-1832" and Clifford Beers' "The mind that found itself" (1908). More recently accounts such as novelist William Styron's "Darkness visible" and feminist writer Kate Millet's "The loony-bin trip" have contributed to this genre. Such narratives can give patients and their families, mental health professionals and other service providers a clearer understanding of the pain, suffering and multiple challenges faced by a patient with a psychiatric disorder.

Narratives written by people with Asperger's Disorder are especially interesting. Most are articulate, or even scholarly, yet on close reading they illustrate the sufferer's enormous sensitivity to environmental stimuli, irrational fears, misinterpretation of social situations, restricted pattern of interests, and constant feeling of difference from others. In "Asparagus Dreams" 13 year old Jessica is vaguely aware that she has something called "asparagus syndrome." Friendless, teased at school, alienated from her two sisters, she leads an isolated life, mostly in her room. She is expelled from school after attacking a child who was mercilessly teasing her, and her parents arrange for her to enter a residential school for children with autistic disorders.

When the shock of being separated from her family and familiar environment dissipates she finds that there are some compensations. Because she is one of the most able students, she has more privileges and can hold herself separate from the "non-verbals, twiddlers and bangers." Shortly after her arrival she meets an older youth "the Aspergic Godfather Shaun" who is revered by most residents, and later becomes a member of the "Deadly Quartet" with Shaun, Simon and Peter. Instead of being given a tiny part, as in her local school, she is given the lead role in the school's production of the musical "Alice in Wonderland."

Her description of the drama teacher's struggle to gain the co-operation of his cast of youngsters with autistic disorders is distinctly amusing. It appears to be one of many examples of the well-meaning but inexperienced and poorly trained staff's attempts to normalise the students. Some portrayals of the staff are more negative, for instance laughing at student's difficulties or appearance, or restricting their food while the staffs themselves have special meals, eat voraciously and are mostly overweight.

By the time she leaves the school, Jessica has gained some insight into her difficulties and is determined that she will do nothing inappropriate in the outside world. No longer will she have the familiar routine and structure. She will have to make her own decisions and correct her own mistakes. She knows that she is "affected by the slightest little crack in the flow of my life" and "if something is changed without me knowing, I would go off like a screaming bomb." That she is able to cope with the real world is suggested by her M.A. in English Literature, and position as a voluntary researcher for an Autism Research Unit.

Child psychiatry trainees and child psychiatrists will find that this book helps them understand the difficulties of a patient with Asperger's Disorder, and fleshes out the sterile clinical descriptions of the DSM IV. Parents of youth with this disorder may gain more appreciation of the subtle but extremely incapacitating attributes of their adolescent, a youngster who sometimes seems normal, at others frustrating and inexplicable. Patients, chosen judiciously, may find meaning and hope in Jessica's progress.

**Susan Penfold MD, Vancouver BC**

## **Asperger Syndrome in Adolescence: Living with the Ups, the Downs, and Things in Between**

**Liane Holliday Willey editor. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers; 2003. 336p. US \$19.95**

Adolescence presents unique challenges to individuals with Asperger's syndrome, many of which will have escaped diagnosis in earlier years, or been misdiagnosed because of prominent attention problems, anxiety or other issues. There are excellent resources available to help parents recognize, understand and work with the key features of this disorder, such as Tony Attwood's Asperger's Syndrome. Individuals with Asperger's have also written creative accounts of the internal experience of living and growing with the disorder, such as Pretending to be Normal by Liane Holliday Willey.

This volume fills a different niche. First, it focuses on the issues that are paramount and unique to adolescence. Clinicians working with parents who have to deal with diagnosis during this period, and understanding why their child who managed previously, is now having so much trouble will benefit from a practical how-to appropriate to this age group. Second, this book brings together such a diverse authorship that the reader cannot help but come away with a sense of the disorder from within, from loving family and from dedicated professionals working to problem solve side by side. Third, the chapters in the book cover areas that I have not seen spoken to with such thoughtfulness anywhere else, although real life demands their attention. This includes Asperger's and sexuality, friendship, safety, school options, siblings, disclosure, motor coordination and coping with the bittersweet news of diagnosis. These are questions I have often been asked. Having a book available that addresses each of these issues by experts in the area from occupational therapists, to private inspector and special education teachers provides a framework and structure for more thoughtful therapeutic interventions.

Professionals who contributed chapters include Tony Attwood who discussed adapting Cognitive Behavior Therapy to Aspergers, Steven Gutstein who has developed Relationship Development Intervention, Isabelle Henault a sexologist, and Richard Howlin a specialist in adolescent psychology. Autobiographical contributions include the forward by a 14 year old, several adults with Asperger's who have written and taught about the disorder, and a mother of seven special needs children among whom four have autism spectrum disorders. Three teachers, a private investigator, and an occupational therapist all add perspectives on assisting with learning, safety and leisure activities. The authorship represents the USA, Canada, Australia, and the UK: in itself a testament to the solidarity of the research community around this disorder and the gains we have made.

The chapters vary, as is always the case in an edited book. I did not expect to agree with everything in every chapter and I did not. I could recommend this book to patients and therapists alike as a useful tool to find strategies that would help, without necessarily recommending it as something that need be swallowed whole. Overall the reading level of the book is high, but not out of reach of educated consumers. Nor is the information provided so simplistic that any good clinician will not pick up new insights and awareness. This is a difficult balance to strike and I was impressed that the task was possible and accomplished.

**Margaret Weiss MD, Vancouver BC**